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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000807

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
PARIS FOR NOBLES, LONDON FOR LORD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/19/2019

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SUBJECT: FRENCH AMBASSADOR UPBEAT ON ASAD TRIP TO PARIS,
FRENCH-SYRIAN RELATIONS

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: The French ambassador to Syria characterized Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's recent visit to Paris as a &PR success8 for Damascus that allowed Asad to make positive impressions on all his interlocutors. The main focus was Middle East peace and other regional issues. Contrary to media reports there was little economic content to the meetings (though Asad offered perspectives on the relative pace of economic and political development in Syria) nor much discussion of the France-Syria bilateral relationship. Apart from an agreement to disagree on the Iranian nuclear file, the two sides apparently had largely convergent views. The stalled EU association agreement has Paris looking at ways to help offset the short-term negative economic consequences of signing. Asad was ↯ negative or aggressive8 in his estimation of U.S. engagement with Syria but noted that he has &other things to do8 while the relationship improves. End summary.

¶2. (C) French Ambassador to Syria Eric Chevallier provided CDA with a readout on November 18 of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's recent working visit to Paris. The November 12-13 trip, which he described as &very positive8 in the view of both parties, comprised a working lunch with President Sarkozy, a meeting with the president of the Senate and several senators (including Sarkozy's personal representative for Syria, Philippe Marini), a two-hour question-and-answer session with opinion leaders, and a dinner with Elysee advisor Claude Gueant. Asad also gave a television interview to France2 and met with members of the expatriate Syrian community. According to Chevallier, Asad left uniformly favorable impressions of his thoughtful and reasoned approach to issues, resulting in a resounding public relations success for Syria. The ambassador recounted that after both the opinion leaders, round table and the TV interview, his contacts, including some participants in the events, had phoned him to say how well they thought the Syrian leader had handled himself.
PEACE, REGIONAL ISSUES PREDOMINATE

¶3. (C) Much of the substance of the meetings has already been reported in the media, including Asad's affirmation that Syria is ready to resume talks with Israel, via Turkish mediation, from the point where they left off at the end of the fourth round last year. Turkey is not necessarily the only possibility, however, as the French are themselves

&working on the possibility of being involved in mediation after Israeli PM Netanyahu expressed openness to that idea days after Asad left Paris. Bashar voiced mild disappointment in the results of U.S. peace efforts but fingered Netanyahu as the main culprit in the current stalemate. The Syrian leader was also quite insistent on the need to get the Palestinians more unified, though not by replacing the process the Egyptians had launched. Amb. Chevallier reported that FM Muallim spoke with HAMAS leader Khalid Meshaal before the trip and heard Meshaal say that he was ready to do more for the sake of reconciliation.

14. (C) On Lebanon, Asad joked that Sarkozy should blame him for violating UNSCR 1559. &I interfered in the process as had the Saudis, he noted with approval) &and we got a government.8 Asad declared himself hopeful that renewed Syrian relations with Riyadh would continue producing cooperation to the benefit of stability in Lebanon. Iran,s nuclear activities were the sole area of disagreement between the leaders, with Asad critical of the "attitude of the P5 1 prior to the explicit acceptance of Iran,s right to civilian nuclear energy. Sarkozy raised the case of French national Clothilde Reiss with Asad, who chided his host for not recognizing enough what a gesture Tehran had made by allowing Reiss to be released from prison pending her trial (now underway). Asad apparently declined to intercede again with the Iranians on her behalf, citing the need to respect Iran,s judicial process.8

LITTLE ON ECONOMICS) OR U.S. ENGAGEMENT

15. (C) Media accounts that there was a substantial focus on commercial and investment opportunities were incorrect, said Chevallier. Nor was there) or did there need to be) much

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evaluation of the bilateral relationship, now on solid footing after numerous reciprocal visits by high-level officials. The ambassador confided that because there will indeed be negative economic consequences for Syria in the short term after the EU Association Agreement comes into effect, Paris is looking at ways to mitigate that impact) though not by offering direct compensation, he quickly added.

16. (C) Asad did offer perspectives on the domestic challenges confronting Syria. Averring that economic modernization would require political modernization as well, he defended the choice of having one proceed more slowly than the other. There had been some opening on the political side, he claimed, citing the media as one example. But the economic track was definitely moving faster &because sometimes you have to start where you can do so the quickest.8 Bashar is definitely hoping to leverage Syria,s status as a potential trade bridge between north and south, east and west. Chevallier shared a personal impression that for this reason Syria would be aiming to encourage stability in Iraq, despite a growing feeling that Iraqi PM Maliki &may not necessarily lose the next elections, in order to reap benefits from reconstruction in its eastern neighbor.

17. (C) Asked about Bashar,s assessment of U.S. engagement with Syria, the ambassador initially paraphrased the comments carried in the media, to the effect of remaining hopeful despite the U.S., not doing enough yet. The tone of the remarks, said Chavallier, was not negative or aggressive. Bashar had then gone on to say that &I have other things to do meantime,8 referring to improving relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and others.

18. (C) Comment: The French relationship with Syria has warmed considerably over the past eighteen months, with the opening in October of a Damascus office of the French development agency the latest embodiment of this rapprochement. Asad,s trip only reinforced the trend. Though Chevallier laughingly wondered what French official might have opined, as Asad advisor Bouthaina Shaaban proudly reported in an interview with Syrian television, that the Sarkozy-Asad meeting was among the most important ever at the Elysee,8 he clearly viewed the trip as a success for both Damascus and Paris. Less clear is how Paris views what many observers here see as Bashar,s stiff-arming of Sarkozy,s ambitions to insert himself into the role of

mediator between Syria and Israel.
HUNTER